An Analysis of Blended Teaching Strategy of College English

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Abstract. Currently, the trajectory of "Internet + education" is unmistakable, propelling the momentum of blended teaching. In order to optimize the efficacy of this innovative teaching approach in College English instruction and elevate teaching standards, this study conducts a strategic analysis of College English blended teaching utilizing SWOT analysis in conjunction with insights from several CSSCI papers published within the past five years. Findings reveal significant internal strengths (S) inherent in blended College English teaching, promising to enhance the existing landscape of College English education. However, this model also presents weaknesses (W) in terms of teaching interaction and monitoring, etc. Moreover, amidst the external environment, opportunities (O) and threats (T) coexist, necessitating a nuanced assessment to leverage strengths and mitigate weaknesses, thereby fostering advancements in blended College English teaching. This paper offers some insights for subsequent reforms in College English blended teaching.

Keywords: College English, blended teaching, SWOT analysis.

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of modern science and technology, particularly the extensive utilization of artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, and other innovations, has facilitated the convergence of online and offline classrooms, heralding a new trend in the educational landscape. This convergence has made it feasible to amalgamate foreign language teaching with information technology. In 2020, following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's Ministry of Education advocated the concept of "keeping learning during class suspension," leading to a surge in demand for online teaching across China. Consequently, this surge further propelled the development and refinement of blended teaching methodologies in colleges and universities. Presently, governments are actively promoting the deep integration of higher education with modern science and technology, vigorously pursuing digital education strategies to enhance the quality and efficacy of higher education.

The adoption of blended teaching in College English has capitalized on the zeitgeist, exhibiting a positive developmental trajectory. However, while this novel approach is gaining traction in institutions worldwide, it also presents many challenges alongside its advantages when compared to traditional models. Thus, conducting a comprehensive analysis of College English blended teaching is imperative to maximize its efficacy in foreign language instruction, thereby fostering deeper reforms in College English education and enhancing teaching quality. Consequently, this paper focuses on blended teaching in College English, undertaking a strategic analysis with the aim of furnishing valuable insights for colleges and universities seeking to refine their approach to blended English teaching.

The SWOT analysis method, originating from management studies, provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing the internal strengths (S), weaknesses (W), external opportunities (O), and threats (T) pertinent to the research subject, within the context of its internal and external developmental environments and conditions. The widespread applicability of SWOT analysis renders it a valuable analytical tool across various fields, notably in higher education, empowering educators to conduct strategic assessments and enhance educational decision-making processes. Employing this method, this paper specifically addresses the following inquiries: What are the strengths (S), weaknesses (W), external opportunities (O), and threats (T) associated with blended College English teaching?
2. Literature Review

Currently, research on blended teaching of College English is widespread in universities and colleges across China, encompassing various categories based on research objectives and outcomes.

2.1 Impact of Blended Teaching in College English

Blended teaching, distinct from traditional classroom models, garners significant scholarly attention concerning its influence. Scholars in this category often focus on specific aspects of College English teaching, with diverse research subjects. Suo and Chi (2018), for instance, examined college students' intercultural communicative competence leveraging massive open online courses, highlighting the positive impact of blended teaching in this domain. Similarly, Zhang, Yang and Zhang (2019) analyzed changes in learners' behaviors within the new model, investigating its influence on English learning strategies.

2.2 Evaluation of Blended Teaching of College English

As blended teaching evolves, it not only enhances College English teaching but also reveals inherent challenges. Consequently, many scholars conduct teaching experiments to comprehensively evaluate this model. Qin, He and Ouyang (2020) explored the advantages and disadvantages of blended teaching by observing the shift in college students' learning approaches within the blended English teaching environment. Lv (2021) conducted blended teaching practices based on MOOCs, utilizing questionnaires and other methods for comprehensive evaluation. These experiments adopt a dialectical perspective, offering insights into blended College English teaching and guiding teaching reforms.

2.3 Mode Construction of Blended Teaching of College English

Compared to traditional classrooms, the efficacy of blended teaching model is evident in practice. Scholars delve into constructing more scientific and effective blended teaching modes to support teaching reforms in the contemporary era. For instance, Hu and Wang (2019) analyzed ecological elements within blended teaching of College English, proposing recommendations for sustainable foreign language education models. Ma, Ge and Hu (2021) introduced a novel blended teaching practice mode using Semantic Wave Theory, addressing integration challenges between online and offline classrooms. Ruan and Zhan (2021) underscored the role of action research in enhancing blended teaching, advocating its adoption to improve teaching quality and mode construction. Ma, Diao and Wang (2021) advocated for transforming blended teaching into SPOC mode, emphasizing optimizing offline teaching links and enhancing process evaluation to refine the blended teaching model of College English.

2.4 Factors Influencing Blended Teaching of College English

Currently, College English blended teaching still needs optimization, prompting numerous scholars to focus on researching the factors influencing this model. One category is internal student factors, such as Ren (2021), who examined the positive role of motivation regulation on college students' engagement in English classroom learning under blended teaching models. Another category is external environmental factors, such as Zhang, Guo and Miao (2021), who explored the impact of learning task characteristics on students' willingness to communicate in English within blended teaching. Zhang, Dong, Sun and Cao (2022) selected user evaluations of 30 foreign language courses on the MOOC platform, revealing that platform support to a certain extent constrains the development of blended teaching. There is also a category related to teacher competence factors, such as Han and Gao (2022), whose research indicated that some teachers have insufficient understanding of blended foreign language teaching, affecting the implementation of teaching practices. Meng and Cui (2023) studied the current status of foreign language teachers' formative assessment literacy in
3. SWOT Strategic Analysis of the Blended Teaching of College English

3.1 Strengths

3.1.1 Enhanced Teaching Ecology

Blended teaching, primarily student-centered, empowers teachers to assume leadership roles, fostering a new teaching structure and nurturing a symbiotic relationship between teachers and students. Teachers play a pivotal role in blended teaching, guiding teaching directions, refining teaching arrangements (Ma et al., 2021), providing effective feedback, and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Through the utilization of multimedia and network technologies, teaching design is optimized, enabling the organization of diverse and engaging teaching activities, thereby empowering students to actively explore problems under teacher guidance. This fosters autonomous and cooperative learning, facilitating profound teaching collaboration between students and teachers.

Furthermore, blended teaching facilitates the establishment of a "teacher learning community," enhancing collaboration in English teaching, curriculum development, and academic research, thereby fostering the sustainable development of the College English teaching ecosystem (Hu & Wang, 2019). Modern online teaching platforms transcend traditional class boundaries, offering comprehensive teaching data across grades and universities, facilitating teacher collaboration, and enhancing teaching modes and quality. These data also serve as valuable research materials, promoting academic cooperation among educators.

3.1.2 Optimized Teaching Process

Blended teaching transcends temporal and spatial limitations, leveraging the advantages of both online and offline environments to rationalize the teaching process. Under this model, offline classrooms extend seamlessly into the online realm (Yang & Feng, 2022). The virtual online environment allows students to engage with tasks anytime and anywhere, fostering preliminary knowledge acquisition. Meanwhile, offline classrooms provide highly interactive environments for face-to-face communication, emphasizing deep comprehension and systematic knowledge construction with teacher guidance. This complementary approach constructs a comprehensive wave process of language acquisition (Ma et al., 2021).

Regarding teaching evaluation methods, blended teaching disrupts traditional summative assessments, introducing diversified, comprehensive, and intelligent formative evaluation systems. Formative evaluation, supported by online teaching platforms, ensures students' learning input and participation are evaluated. Modern technologies, including artificial intelligence, expedite evaluation feedback cycles, while online platforms facilitate transparent and archived learning processes, enabling objective and reliable formative evaluations (Zhu & Lv, 2022).

3.1.3 Improved Learning Experiences

Blended teaching, facilitated by modern online platforms, harnesses the openness and flexibility of the internet, granting students access to a wealth of learning resources and fostering a stimulating learning environment (Lv, 2021). Taking Chinese University MOOC as an example, as a large-scale online open learning platform, as of January 26th, 2024, it includes more than 76,000 online courses, serving 1.27 billion people in China. Platforms like the Chinese University MOOC offer a vast array of courses, enriching teaching content beyond textbooks, often presented in vivid multimedia formats. This resource abundance enhances student engagement, as affirmed by Suo and Chi's (2018) findings.

Moreover, blended teaching augments communication opportunities, fostering interactive experiences. Traditional English teaching tends to prioritize knowledge transmission over teacher-student communication (Lv, 2021), whereas blended teaching encourages robust communication via online platforms. Teachers initiate discussions, guiding students to participate, comment, and ask
questions, promoting comprehension and application of knowledge. Interactive activities within blended teaching tools also encourage peer collaboration, enriching the learning process.

3.1.4 Promoted Deep Learning

Blended teaching, by combining online and offline formats, challenges the traditional teacher-centered model, empowering students with learning autonomy and facilitating in-depth learning. Students engage with pre-class online tasks, acquiring basic knowledge and tailoring learning strategies to individual needs, fostering personalized learning plans and deepening understanding (Qin et al., 2020). This approach accommodates varying student paces, enabling those with weaker foundations to solidify knowledge and allowing proficient students to pursue advanced topics (Zhang et al., 2019).

Furthermore, blended teaching nurtures student initiative, cultivating independent learning and critical inquiry. Online learning encourages active cognitive engagement, prompting students to seek solutions independently or through peer collaboration (Zhu & Lv, 2022). By shifting basic concept explanations online and fostering offline classroom exploration, blended teaching fosters active learning, transitioning from passive knowledge absorption to active exploration, thus promoting deep learning (Qin et al., 2020).

3.2 Weaknesses

3.2.1 Inadequate Teaching Interaction

The effectiveness of teacher-student interaction in blended College English teaching faces several challenges. Firstly, the shift away from traditional offline classes reduces direct teacher presence, with instructors primarily represented through pre-recorded videos and online exchanges (Blaine, 2019). This diminishes emotional connections between teachers and students, hindering the establishment of trust and potentially impacting interaction efficiency. Additionally, while online platforms offer students more opportunities for individual communication with teachers, the sudden increase in workload for educators can compromise the timeliness of their responses.

Secondly, student-student interaction quality in blended College English teaching is also compromised. Firstly, the nature of blended teaching diminishes students' sense of presence, as they engage more with a modular and technologically driven online learning environment (Blaine, 2019). Communication with peers primarily occurs through electronic devices, limiting their ability to perceive nonverbal cues and emotional nuances, thereby heightening feelings of insecurity and uncertainty during interactions. Moreover, in the absence of teacher intervention, the quality of student-to-student interaction during online learning sessions becomes difficult to ensure.

3.2.2 Weakened Teaching Supervision

Blended teaching represents a significant advancement in overcoming the constraints of time and space, offering students the flexibility to engage in online learning at their convenience. However, the extensive spatial separation and the lack of robust supervision mechanisms pose challenges for teachers in effectively monitoring and guiding students' online learning activities within university settings. Unlike traditional classrooms, the blended teaching environment extends beyond physical boundaries, requiring students to independently complete assigned tasks based on online guidance provided by instructors before class. Consequently, environmental disparities exacerbate variations in students' learning experiences and outcomes (Ma et al., 2021). Despite the potential benefits of online learning resources, some students may engage in detrimental behaviors such as "brushing classes", leading to concerns about the quality of their learning outcomes (Qin et al., 2020). Additionally, as blended teaching is still in its early stages of exploration across educational institutions, there remains a lack of comprehensive and multi-level supervision mechanisms. This inadequacy in supervision compromises the integrity of students' online learning data, thereby impeding teachers' ability to accurately assess students' mastery of knowledge and jeopardizing overall teaching quality.
3.2.3 Increasing Teaching Load for Teachers

Blended teaching disrupts conventional educational paradigms, necessitating meticulous planning to seamlessly integrate online and offline instruction. This transition imposes additional responsibilities on educators, intensifying their workload. Firstly, as an essential prerequisite for successful blended teaching, language instructors must stay abreast of technological advancements, continuously updating their skills to incorporate modern educational tools (Hu & Wang, 2019). This ongoing professional development demands significant time and energy investment.

Secondly, educators must embrace innovative pedagogical approaches, meticulously designing online and offline learning activities that align with educational objectives and capitalize on available network resources. This entails curating and integrating digital teaching materials, such as recorded lectures, interactive courseware, and supplementary reading materials, to create a cohesive learning experience. Such endeavors require considerable cognitive and behavioral engagement from teachers.

Furthermore, educators play a crucial role in fostering student engagement and facilitating meaningful learning experiences. Active involvement in students' learning journey, including facilitating discussions, providing personalized feedback, and cultivating positive teacher-student interactions, is indispensable for ensuring the efficacy of blended teaching. However, these efforts unavoidably increase teachers' workload and may divert their attention from other instructional responsibilities.

3.2.4 Growing Learning burden for Students

Blended teaching demands enhanced autonomous learning skills from students within networked environments (Viberg et al., 2020). Educators orchestrate a multitude of activities in the blended learning landscape, heightening students' workload. The majority of these tasks necessitate robust self-directed learning abilities. Nevertheless, many college students are accustomed to traditional instructional methods, and their aptitude for autonomous learning may be underdeveloped. In the absence of direct guidance from instructors (Lv, 2021), students may find themselves compelled to extend their study time and shoulder increased academic responsibilities.

3.3 Opportunities

3.3.1 Advancements in Modern Science and Technology

Currently, modern science and technologies have made groundbreaking advancements, setting the stage for the extensive evolution of blended teaching in College English education (Li, Jia & Jiang, 2022). Ongoing enhancements in Internet technology, network communication infrastructure, and multimedia tools, coupled with the refinement of online support systems and the continual innovation of intelligent language learning aids (Hu & Zhang, 2023), promise to enrich the blended learning experience for students. The integration of artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and cloud computing into blended teaching enhances the functionality of smart platforms, empowering educators to streamline teaching administration and facilitate comprehensive evaluations, thereby augmenting the efficacy of blended teaching feedback mechanisms. In summary, the perpetual advancements in modern science and technology have propelled "Internet + education" to the forefront of College English teaching reform in the post-pandemic era, fostering a paradigm shift in foreign language instructional methodologies (Han and Gao, 2022).

3.3.2 Government Policy Support

In recent years, China has continuously enhanced its relevant policies, fostering the advancement of blended College English teaching. The Report to the 20th CPC National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022 underscored the imperative of "promoting the digitalization of education" (Li, 2023). Subsequently, in 2023, the Ministry of Education expanded upon the "Double Ten Thousand Plan," initially introduced in 2019, with plans to identify an additional 5,800 national first-class undergraduate courses. These encompass various modalities including online, offline, blended online and offline, virtual simulation experiments, and social practice. In the same year, the Ministry of Education released Key Tasks of Building a Learning Society, emphasizing that "the digitalization of education should be regarded as a multiplier to promote the construction of a learning..."
society." In essence, the state has provided comprehensive policy support to steer the development of blended teaching from a macro perspective. Under the influence of these policies, universities, and society at large are accelerating the construction of blended teaching infrastructure, enhancing both online and offline teaching systems, and fostering the efficient development of College English education in China towards digitalization, networking, and intelligence.

3.3.3 Uniqueness of College English Teaching

Firstly, compared to other disciplines, the relationship between foreign language learning and information technology is inseparable (Hu & Zhang, 2023). Students' proficiency in English can be assessed across four domains: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through blended teaching, rich online resources can augment language input channels, offering students ample authentic language materials from around the globe, thereby reinforcing their listening and reading skills. The integration of intelligent tools, such as automated correction and man-machine dialogue, in blended teaching facilitates the resolution of language expression issues and elevates students' English proficiency. Secondly, College English courses, as compulsory subjects for non-English majors, cater to a diverse audience with robust learning demands. However, insufficient class hours in Chinese College English programs (Li et al., 2022) and the tight scheduling of traditional teaching modes often compromise teaching quality. Blended teaching, on the other hand, optimally utilizes students' available time and significantly enhances the landscape of College English education in China.

3.4 Threats

3.4.1 Teachers' Information Literacy Deficiency

In the blended teaching model, teachers are required to integrate information technology into the teaching process to modernize teaching methods. However, the information literacy of English teachers in Chinese colleges and universities still requires improvement. While teachers recognize the importance of acquiring digital knowledge and enhancing their proficiency in modern educational technology, these competencies have not always translated into practical digital application skills (Hu & Zhang, 2023). Specifically, some teachers lack proficiency in using digital tools for information retrieval, hindering their efficient utilization of network resources. Moreover, their grasp of online teaching skills may not be sufficiently deep, impeding their ability to fully utilize the auxiliary teaching functions of online platforms. This results in low efficiency in lesson preparation, diminished confidence in online teaching, and occasionally, negative attitudes towards related technologies. Consequently, many teachers revert to traditional teaching methods after initial exposure to blended teaching. This tendency is particularly pronounced among experienced teachers whose teaching approaches are entrenched, and who may exhibit reluctance to adopt new teaching methods (Wang et al., 2023). Thus, the deficiency in teachers' information literacy poses a barrier to the promotion of blended teaching.

3.4.2 University Support Shortage for Blended Teaching

The development of College English teaching in China varies greatly across institutions. In the realm of online education, the gap in educational resources is further emphasized, especially concerning the support universities offer in terms of hardware and software for blended teaching (Sun & Wang, 2022). College English Teaching Guide advocates for the use of information technology to create diverse learning environments, posing significant challenges for universities in economically disadvantaged regions with limited educational resources. These institutions struggle to establish digitalized, modernized smart teaching environments due to a lack of hardware support for advanced smart classrooms and the inability to develop online teaching platforms with intelligent analysis capabilities, crucial for promoting deep learning. Consequently, the implementation of blended teaching in College English is hindered.

Moreover, some universities lack coherent support policies in software environments. Teacher-oriented educational resources play a vital role in enhancing the professional competence of college educators. However, inadequate provision of resources, such as academic lectures, impedes teachers' proficiency in blended teaching, thus compromising its effectiveness. Furthermore, the development
of high-quality blended courses is often spearheaded by individual teachers or teams (Ma et al., 2021), signaling a failure on the part of universities to foster educational cohesion and promote teaching reform. This lack of institutional support discourages teachers from embracing the new blended teaching model, potentially dampening their enthusiasm for work and impeding the efficient development of blended courses.

3.4.3 Teachers’ Limited Understanding of Blended Teaching

Although blended teaching is not unfamiliar to College English instructors, some educators lack a comprehensive understanding of its essence and may even misinterpret its principles (Han & Gao, 2022), posing a significant threat to its effective implementation. Firstly, there exists a narrow conception among some teachers regarding the nature of blended teaching. They may merely increase the proportion of online classes without achieving the essential integration of diverse teaching elements and varied instructional methods as advocated by modern pedagogical concepts. Consequently, their implementation of blended teaching may merely replicate traditional classroom practices (Ma et al., 2021), failing to drive genuine educational reform. Secondly, certain educators misinterpret the notion of "empowering students' agency within the blended learning environment," and consequently, they diminish their own instructional roles (Mendieta & Barkuizen, 2020). By neglecting their crucial roles as facilitators, organizers, and guides in the learning process, they fail to provide timely support to students, ultimately compromising the effectiveness of their teaching endeavors.

4. Conclusion

Based on the SWOT analysis tool and several CSSCI papers in recent five years, this paper analyzes the blended teaching of College English, and the results are shown in Figure 1:

Figure 1 SWOT Analysis of the Blended Teaching in College English

The strengths of College English blended teaching lie in its ability to foster a new ecological relationship between teachers and students. This approach promotes collaboration and engagement, creating a dynamic learning environment. Additionally, it optimizes the macro-process of teaching by strategically distributing online and offline content while enhancing teaching evaluation methods. By providing rich and interesting teaching resources, blended teaching enriches students' learning experiences and encourages the development of in-depth learning and autonomy in students' studies.

However, blended teaching also faces several weaknesses. One notable weakness is the lack of emotional links between participants, resulting in low efficiency in teacher-student and student-student interactions. Furthermore, the supervision mechanism is imperfect, leading to weak teaching monitoring. Additionally, the adoption of blended teaching requires teachers to acquire modern information technology skills and redesign teaching methods, increasing their workload. Similarly,
students must possess information literacy and autonomous learning skills, thereby increasing their learning burden.

Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities for the advancement of College English blended teaching. The continuous progress of modern science and technology offers significant potential for reforming teaching methods. National policies also provide strong support for universities to promote the digitalization of education and implement blended teaching. Moreover, blended teaching can effectively address the unique needs of foreign language learning, thereby improving the current imbalance between supply and demand in College English teaching.

However, there are also threats that need to be addressed. Teachers’ lack of information literacy hampers their ability to efficiently implement blended teaching methods. Additionally, the uneven development level of College English teaching in China, coupled with insufficient hardware and software support for blended teaching, poses significant challenges. Furthermore, inadequate comprehension of blended teaching among teachers affects teaching arrangements and effectiveness under the new mode.

In conclusion, the integration of higher education and information technology has given rise to the blended teaching approach in College English, offering unparalleled advantages compared to traditional teaching methods and promising broad development prospects. However, the blended teaching mode also comes with its limitations, heavily influenced by external factors such as teachers’ information literacy and university support during its development phase. Therefore, it is imperative for all universities and educators to continue leveraging the strengths of blended College English teaching while actively addressing its remaining weaknesses. By assessing the current situation and transforming challenges into opportunities, universities can maximize the potential of blended teaching. It is anticipated that the analysis of the blended teaching strategy in College English using the SWOT tool will serve as a valuable reference for future research endeavors in this field.

References


